The West Confronting Russian Aggression and Its Impact on the Western Balkan States

By Skender Jashari, PhD Candidate | Criminologist | Counter-Terrorism Expert | Hybrid Warfare Specialist | Security Policy Advisor | Aerospace & Ground Systems Designer

Executive Summary

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has accelerated Europe's return to hard-power geopolitics and exposed long-standing vulnerabilities in the Western Balkans. This analysis examines how Russian hybrid operations, Serbia's strategic alignment with Moscow and Beijing, and the rapid transformation of warfare—particularly drone-centric and autonomous systems—shape regional stability. The Western Balkans remain susceptible to foreign influence, institutional fragility, and slow defense modernization. Strengthening deterrence, enhancing institutional resilience, and deepening EU–NATO coordination are essential to prevent the region from becoming a strategic vulnerability within Europe's security architecture.

Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has reshaped Europe's security architecture and accelerated a broader shift toward renewed geopolitical competition. The conflict has compelled NATO and EU member states to reassess defense readiness, strategic planning, and long-term capability development. While many European countries have adapted to this new reality, several Western Balkan states—Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro—remain insufficiently aligned with the evolving threat environment.

Historically exposed to external influence and institutional fragility, the Western Balkans now face renewed strategic pressure as Russia expands its hybrid operations, political leverage, and influence networks. These dynamics challenge not only regional stability but also the broader Euro-Atlantic security framework.

Historical Context and Structural Vulnerabilities

The region has long been shaped by great-power competition. Historically, states aligned with Russia prepared for conflict earlier and more systematically than their neighbors, influencing the outcomes of major regional wars. A similar asymmetry is emerging today: while many European states are rapidly modernizing their militaries, several Western Balkan governments have not yet adjusted their security posture to contemporary threats.

Key vulnerabilities include:

- limited defense budgets and slow modernization
- exposure to foreign influence and hybrid operations
- institutional fragility in countering disinformation and extremism
- insufficient interagency coordination

- lack of long-term strategic planning

These weaknesses create openings for external actors to exert political, informational, and economic influence.

Regional Dynamics and External Influence

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has reinforced its strategic partnership with Serbia, which maintains close political, military, and economic ties with Moscow and Beijing. This alignment has significant implications for regional stability, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro, where political tensions and ethnic divisions remain vulnerable to manipulation.

Hybrid activities—including disinformation campaigns, political interference, and the instrumentalization of ideological narratives—continue to challenge institutional resilience across the region. These developments complicate EU and NATO efforts to maintain stability, deter malign influence, and support the Western Balkans' alignment with the transatlantic community.

The Transformation of Warfare: Drones, Autonomy, and Mass Production

The war in Ukraine has demonstrated that modern conflict is increasingly shaped by:

- uncrewed aerial systems (UAS)
- uncrewed ground vehicles (UGV)
- mass-produced, low-cost platforms
- AI-enabled reconnaissance and targeting
- scalable, cost-efficient warfare

Key global trends include:

- global drone production projected to rise **+45.7% by 2030**
- military UAV market expected to grow **+265% by 2035**
- global military spending rising from **2.24 trillion USD (2022)** to **2.718 trillion USD (2024)**
- European defense spending reaching **563 billion EUR in 2025 (+12.6%)**
- Ukraine's defense budget increasing **640% in 2022**, reaching **64.7 billion USD in 2024**
- Russia increasing its defense budget to **149 billion USD in 2024 (+38%)**

The United States allocated **13.4 billion USD** for autonomous systems in FY2026, while Europe is investing heavily in drone programs and emerging defense technologies. Ukraine's plan to procure **4.5 million FPV drones in 2025** underscores the scale of future drone-centric warfare.

These developments highlight the urgent need for Western Balkan states to modernize their defense structures and integrate autonomous systems into military planning.

Summary of Key Trends

- global drone production: **+45.7% by 2030**
- military drone market: **+265% by 2035**
- global investments in autonomy: **tens of billions annually**
- Europe: **rapid defense spending growth**
- Ukraine: **emerging as a major FPV drone producer**

Policy Recommendations

1. Strengthen EU–NATO Coordination in the Western Balkans

Western Balkan states should:

- increase defense spending
- modernize armed forces
- integrate UAS, UGV, and counter- UAS systems
- enhance interoperability with NATO standards

For Brussels and allied capitals, reinforcing deterrence in the region is essential to preventing further strategic penetration by external actors.

2. Enhance Institutional Resilience and Counter Hybrid Measures

The region would benefit from:

- strengthened vetting mechanisms within security institutions
- improved counter- intelligence cooperation
- identification of foreign influence networks
- protection of democratic processes from external interference

These measures align with EU and NATO objectives to counter malign influence and safeguard democratic governance.

3. Support Defense Industrial Development

Western Balkan states should:

- develop domestic drone production
- invest in autonomous systems
- participate in EU defense innovation initiatives

This would reduce dependency on external suppliers and strengthen regional resilience.

4. Strengthen Regional Coordination

Enhanced cooperation among Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina is essential for:

- intelligence sharing
- border security
- counter-terrorism
- crisis response

A more integrated regional approach supports broader European stability.

Strategic Outlook

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has reshaped global security dynamics and accelerated Europe's return to hard-power geopolitics. The Western Balkans, positioned at the intersection of competing strategic interests, must adapt rapidly to avoid becoming a zone of vulnerability within the European security architecture.

Strengthening defense capabilities, enhancing institutional resilience, and aligning with EU–NATO strategic priorities are essential steps to ensure long-term stability and security in the region.